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ABSTRACT

The Dallas Independent School District has tried to address the problems involved in providing appropriate education for diverse communities by establishing minimum long-range goals and annual objectives in priority subject areas. The Campus Level Planning Project was a program to encourage program planning at the local school level. Each participating school organized a planning team composed of the principal, school personnel, and representatives of the community. During the project's three years of operation, twenty-eight schools completed program plans. Many other schools volunteered for assistance but dropped out of the project. A project staff assisted the planning teams. Major conclusions of the experience were that local school personnel do not feel a need to do formal planning; the planning team approach presupposes both a propensity toward shared decision-making by administrators and a healthy school climate; systematic planning at the school level is more likely to occur when planning is tactical as opposed to strategic; and school personnel value data for decision-making more than they do for planning. The greatest achievement of the program was exposing school personnel to data sources and training them in utilizing these data sources for immediate instructional and operational purposes. (Author/JM)

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Planning and Decision-Making at the Local School Level

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Planning and Decision-Making at the Local School Level

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It is generally agreed that cultural and economic factors affect students' response to education and to the process by which education is made available. One cannot necessarily expect the same educational program and process that appeals to students from high academic, affluent communities to also appeal to students from low academic, poverty strickened communities. The economic, social, academic and cultural diversity among communities within a large city school district makes it almost impossible for a school district's central administration to define and develop an educational program that would serve the immediate and long-range needs of all its constituents.

In the Dallas Independent School District (DISD), we have tried to address the problems involved in providing appropriate education for diverse communities by establishing minimum long-range goals and annual objectives in priority subject areas. These goals and objectives are to be achieved by all students within the District. Beyond these, local schools are expected to further develop the District's baseline curriculum to respond to specific needs of the local community.

We do not claim to have found the ultimate solution; rather, we have discovered additional problems.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is two-fold, and is heuristic in nature. First, I would like to describe the Campus Level Planning Project, our

means for effectuating program development at the local level. Second, I would like to share with you some of the things that we have learned about campus level program planning as an approach to educational development.

For those of you who are considering campus level program planning as a means to educational improvement, you may be able to profit from our experiences. For those of you who have tried similar approaches, we can compare notes of our experiences.

Methodology

Project Description

The Campus Level Planning Project was intended to assist local schools in developing plans of action for the improvement of education and the process of education at the local school level.

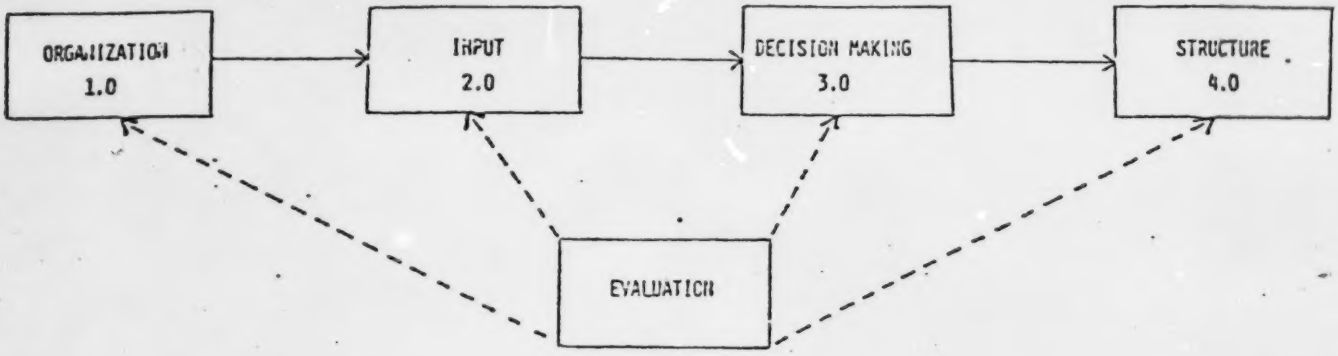
Each participating school was required to organize a planning team which might be comprised of the principal, and representatives from the teaching faculty, administrative staff, and the community. The planning team was charged with the responsibility of planning programs to meet the specific needs of the school. A planning model and assistance from the project staff in implementing the model were provided each planning team.

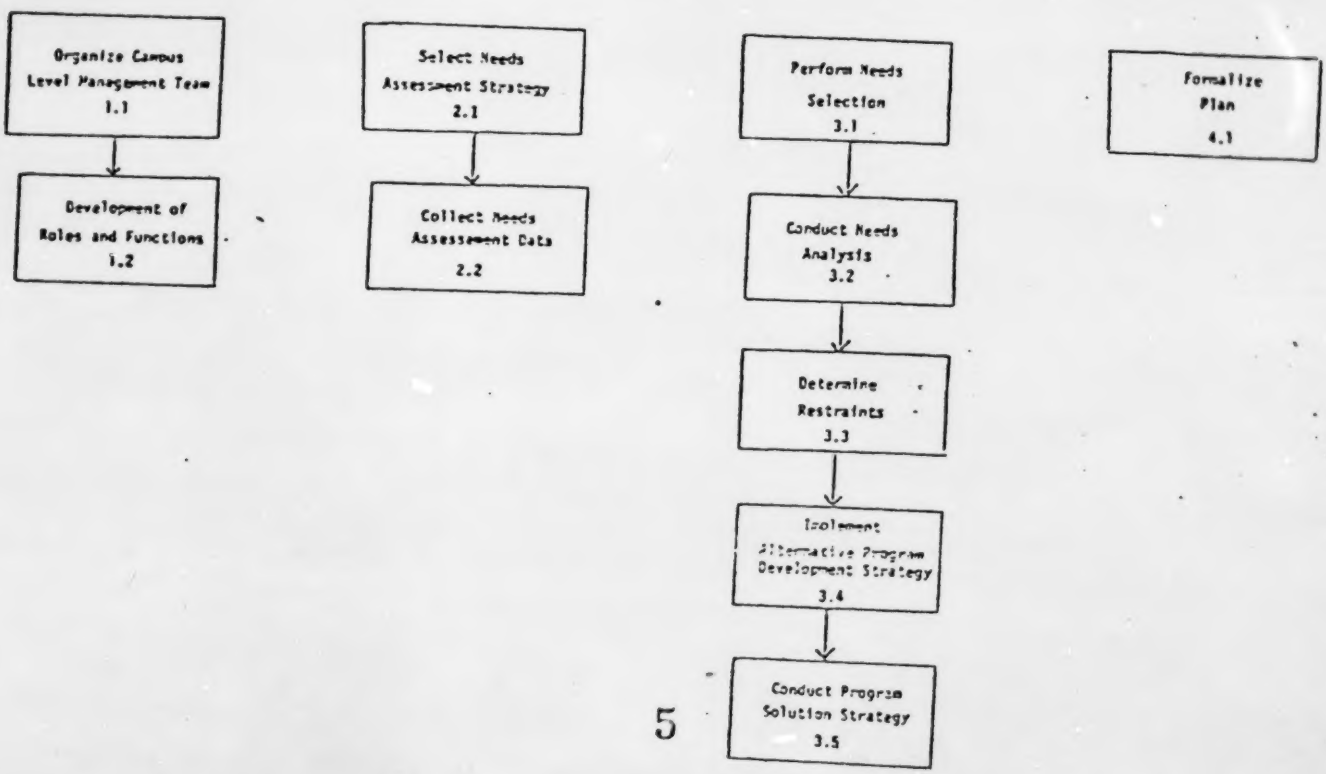
The model, depicted in Figure 1, contains five major phases: (1) Organization, (2) Input, (3) Decision-Making, (4) Structure, and (5) Evaluation.

Organization entails the selection of the management team by the principal and definition of the roles and functions of its members. The Input phase involves strategies for identifying discrepancies between

Figure 1

A PLANNING MODEL FOR SCHOOL BASED DECISION MAKING





the present state and a desired state of the school. The Decision-Making phase involves strategies for prioritizing the identified needs and selecting goals and objectives in response to the needs. The Structure phase involves strategies for determining the most cost-effective/cost beneficial means for achieving the chosen goals and objectives. Evaluation using the CIPP approach, occurs throughout each of the preceeding phases of activities.

The model was intended to provide the framework for a systematic approach to planning and decision-making. A procedural handbook for conducting activities suggested in each phase of the model was also provided each team.

Having successfully completed each phase of the planning model, a school was expected to have a plan of action detailed enough for an individual who was not involved in the planning to be able to implement the plan and attain the intended results.

Project Participants

Participation in the Campus Level Planning Project was voluntary. The project staff could serve approximately twenty schools per year. Selection of schools was made on a first-come first-serve basis. During the project's three years of operation, twenty-eight schools (three high schools, two middle schools, and twenty-three elementary schools) completed program plans through the project. Many schools volunteered for assistance but dropped out of the project for various reasons which will be discussed later in the paper.

During the first year of the project, six schools participated (two high schools, three middle schools and one elementary school).

Five of the resulting program plans received funding. Although funding could not be promised future participants, over twenty-five schools applied for participation during the project's second year of operation. However, by half-way the school year, the number of participants had dropped from twenty to thirteen. Most of the remaining schools were elementary schools that found the Campus Level Planning Project helpful in assisting them in developing program improvement plans as required by court order. Few of the remaining thirteen participants completed a program plan during that school year. During the third year of operation, the project staff assisted two of the elementary schools from the previous year in completing their plan of action.

At the beginning of the third school year of the project, a brochure in which the project was described and a request form for participation were mailed to the principal of each school. Approximately thirty schools requested the project staff to come and discuss the planning process and requirements for participation. Prior to the mailing of the brochure, principals had been told about the availability of the planning services in several of their general meetings. Although all schools requesting a visit from the project staff were visited, only nine schools (two high schools, and seven elementary schools) chose to participate in the project. The major reason given for non-participation was lack of time required to implement the planning model.

Procedure

The general strategy used by the project staff was to have the participating school select a planning team. The principal was advised that the team's composition should be diverse enough to assure a broad

decision-making base, yet cohesive enough to work well as a team. It was further recommended that the principal be the team leader.

Once the team was organized, a member of the project staff was assigned to work with the team. The major role of the project staff was to assist the planning teams in identifying and/or developing strategies to operationalize each phase of the planning process. In other words, the project staff provided the technical expertise in data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, and in decision-making and resource allocation.

As we intended the planning to be a continuous process carried on by the local school, we wanted local school personnel to be able to repeat any and all phases of the planning process. Therefore, each planning team was provided a procedural handbook for conducting activities suggested in each phase of the model. The handbook was intended to reduce the need for assistance from the project staff.

Generally, the planning team met twice a month. However, the amount of time given to planning and the regularity of planning meetings were left to the discretion of the principal. It was suggested that the project staff be included in the process evaluation of each completed phase of the planning process.

The schools were left on their own for implementation of their plans.

Results

The results of our experiences in planning at the local level will be discussed in the context of several research propositions presented

in an AERA paper by Goldman and Monihan.[1] It is not suggested that these propositions have been researched in any purposeful way within the context of our experiences. Rather, it was in retrospect that our experiences were compared with Goldman and Monihan's propositions.

> Proposition 1: Educational planning is an activity initiated by the chief administrative officer of a given system. The chief administrative officer plays the key role in initiation in local systems by (a) active leadership and/or (b) legitimation.

In the project, the chief administrative officer was the school principal. Schools in which planning was relegated to a team, with perhaps a teacher or the counselor assigned to be team leader, the planning process failed. In most cases it was not a lack of leadership on the part of the assigned team leader. It seemed to have been a combination of problems, including the perceived lack of legitimation.

> Proposition 2: Systematic educational planning is initiated by cosmopolitan superintendents who have strong formal and informal links to regional, state and federal agencies and organizations.

Our experiences suggested that the more serious and productive planning teams were led by principals who could be characterized as cosmopolitan, as defined by Gouldner.[2] These principals were the ones who had been involved in management training workshops provided by the District, and who demonstrated a great deal of commitment to data-based decision-making and systematic planning.

> Proposition 3: The initiation of local planning is related to external stimuli, especially (a) the availability of external sources of funding, (b) the geographic proximity of external agencies which are attempting to induce local planning, and (c) the climate and inducements set by state departments of education.

Support of the proposition that planning is related to the availability of funds was evidenced by the number of schools that requested participation in the project after word got around that the first group of participants received support funds for their plans. Again support of this proposition was evidenced by the number of plans submitted by elementary schools when improvement funds were made available. Despite the court-ordered improvement and repeated efforts to obtain improvement plans, few elementary schools submitted detailed plans with budget justifications prior to the availability of support funds. Our experiences did not yield any support for (b) and (c) of proposition 3.

> Proposition 4: Interventions are needed to keep a planning process from "bogging down" and to give continued direction to the process. Such interventions are not usually built into planning models and must be developed locally.

We found that local school personnel lacked the "know-how" of conducting a needs assessment, determining priorities, judging alternative program strategies, developing a detailed plan of action, and evaluating the total process. To avoid the team's becoming bogged down in any phase of the planning process, the expertise of the project staff proved to be an invaluable resource. Those teams that failed to utilize this resource to its fullest did become bogged down. This usually occurred in the Input Phase of the planning where the teams usually were provided achievement test data to indicate academic strengths and weaknesses. Many teams never got beyond the analysis of these data. In fact, the typical behavior of unsuccessful teams was to go from the analysis of achievement test data to a decision to increase efforts in

weak subject areas without an understanding of the possible underlying causes of the weaknesses and without a specific plan of action. Thus, their efforts were often without focus, resulting in frustration at worst, and "shotgun" success at best.

> Proposition 5: Inherent in educational planning models is the mandate for the greater involvement of participants.

The implications of proposition 5 are not clear to this author. However, we expected all local school personnel and representatives from the various sectors of the local community to become involved in the planning process through various input channels to each phase of the planning process. This simply did not happen in any of the participating schools. At the minimum, we expected all local school personnel to become involved in the planning process at some point. This happened in most elementary schools where personnel were fewer than ten persons.

> Proposition 6: Educational planning processes are political resources and will be used to reinforce the values and goals of those who control them.

Perhaps proposition 6 explains the tendency of local school principals to restrict participation in the planning process to selected school personnel. There was great opposition to having representatives from the community on the planning team, despite promotional efforts at the District level to involve local communities in the improvement of local schools.

Proposition 7: Planning models include decision-making processes which are open, rational, and based on collected data. These processes may be used in attempts either to reinforce or change the customary decision-making process in a school district.

Survey data indicated that the planning process was more highly valued by principals and planning teams as a decision-making process than as a planning process. This seems to have been related to school personnel's lack of confidence in plans developed in response to a dynamic and turbulent educational environment.

Proposition 8: The decision-making process in educational planning will become a political issue when (a) planning is conducted on controversial topics, and/or (b) there is a lack of local consensus on goals, and/or (c) the customary decision-making process of a school district is changed by the planning process.

Our experiences provide some support for (b) and (c) of proposition 8. Elementary schools attempting to develop plans in support of court-ordered developments, generally objected to the stated goals for early childhood education. Those goals had been defined without input or consensus from local schools. Many elementary principals appealed to central administration for reconsideration of the goals. Others provided justification for their failure to support the goals.

Our decision-making process suggests group decision-making. Survey data provided by members of the planning teams indicated that team members felt that their assistance was valued more in making decisions about instructional development than in making decisions about operations. The general feeling was that group decision-making about operations was threatening to local school administrators.

Proposition 9: The most serious problems faced by school leaders in developing systematic local planning are "people-related" rather than related to the techniques and methodologies of planning. The most serious problems are (a) gaining commitment of participants in the system to the need for planning, (b) gaining their commitment to and active participation in the specific processes used, (c) finding and allocating the necessary time for planning to take place, and (d) dealing with interface issues which arise as diverse groups come together to plan.

With the exception of (d), the above problems were the major ones that we encountered in campus level planning.

There was no evidence to suggest that principals and local school personnel felt a need to be systematic in their planning. Even when incentive funds were made available to support sound plans, commitment to systematic planning was not significantly enhanced. Several times it was suggested that the local school could better utilize the available funds to pay the planning team an hourly wage; thus, commitment might be generated and the problem of finding time for planning might be alleviated.

Proposition 10: External consultants are usually involved in the initiation and implementation of local educational planning. Besides training participants in the process, they often influence the level of expectation of participants toward planning and the style of planning (e.g., amount of participation).

As stated earlier, a project staff member was assigned to work with each planning team. The degree to which the assigned person influenced the level of expectation of participants toward planning and toward the style of planning is not known. However, we intended such influence to come from the school principal.

Proposition 11: The "pure" planning models found in the literature are modified when translated to the local setting. The character of local process variables and adaptations made for local application more strongly influence success and direction of planning than the specific model used.

We gave the local school a basic systems model, cast in the context of planning. Attempts to implement the model as it was designed did not prove to be successful in most settings. The process seemed too broad and too unrealistic. Members of the planning team were not willing to implement the required steps of the model. There was the attitude, "Why do all of this when we know what the major problems are?" This attitude led to focusing the planning process on the "felt" priority needs rather than on the priority needs derived from a complete data-base needs assessment as suggested by the model. When the model was applied to some specific problem or potential problem area, planning was more successful. Participation resulted from interest and commitment was almost automatic.

Conclusions

Our experiences led us to four major conclusions about our approach to planning and decision-making at the local school level. The first conclusion was that local school personnel do not feel a need to do formal planning. This was evidenced by their failure to see the importance of being systematic in their decision-making, and by their unwillingness to commit themselves to the tasks involved in systematic planning. We attributed these behaviors mainly to the academic training of local school personnel. Planning and data-based decision-making are management tools. Historically, management has not been stressed in the training of local school personnel. It has been within the last ten years that we have talked about training school managers rather than school administrators, classroom managers rather than classroom teachers. The change from school administrators and classroom teachers to school managers and classroom managers has been a slow process.

The second conclusion was that the planning team approach presupposes certain local conditions which include: (1) an administrative style that is characterized by shared decision-making, shared responsibility and shared accountability, and (2) a school climate that is characterized by trusting relationships, mutual dependency, and mutual respect. In the absence of these, the planning team approach was not successful.

The third conclusion was that systematic planning at the school level is more likely to occur when planning is tactical as opposed to strategic. Tactical planning primarily serves to facilitate system maintenance; whereas strategic planning emphasizes system adaptation to change over a period of time. The turbulent and complex nature of the environment of public schools makes tactical planning more appealing to local school personnel than strategic planning.

The fourth and final conclusion was that school personnel value data for decision-making more than they do for planning. Perhaps our greatest achievement, as suggested by feedback from local schools, was that of exposing school personnel to data sources and training them in utilizing these data sources for immediate instructional and operational purposes.

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